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What and Why Is Christmas

A Humanistic Interpretation of the Midwinter Festival

An Address
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The Human Christmas

There seem to be two kinds of feeling about Christmas. Christian people think that it is a purely Christian festival—a commemoration indeed of the birthday of the founder of the Christian system—and that those who are not Christians, those called unbelievers for instance and Jews, have no right to celebrate it. They say, "What right have you to take part in our Christmas celebration? You do not believe in the angel-proclaimed and star-heralded son of God and Mary. This is our great day, but to you it can mean nothing." They look upon the observance of it by others as a proof after all of how powerful Christianity is in the world—since people more or less conform to it, though they do not believe in it; they think that the tree and the lights and the presents are but an echo of the joy that Jesus, so many thousand years ago, was born into the world. To the Christian, Christmas is the birthday of Jesus, just as February 22nd is Washington's birthday. But people who think and speak like this only betray their religious and historic ignorance. The only thing specifically Christian about Christmas is the name. The thing itself is an old heathen custom, and under some other name is thousands of years older than Christianity. Not a single one of its characteristic and still popular features is of Christian origin; and instead of being the property of one religion or of one nation, it is the common heritage of all. It would no doubt have come down to us if Christianity had never existed. The only difference would be that the church services in honor of the birth of Jesus would not be held; but the presents, the lighted tree, and the general light-heartedness and joy would be with us just the same.

On the other hand there are those liberals who think it a mark of sincerity not to pay any attention to Christmas. If people like ourselves do it, they call it a concession to orthodoxy. Such people say, "Why mingle with and help perpetuate these superstitions? Let the orthodox celebrate their impossible creeds, if they will; but let us do what we can to clear the air of fog and mist and let in the sunlight of reality." From this I dissent as heartily as I do from the protest of the Christian. Christmas is a day that belongs to man. It is our inheritance from an antiquity so hoary that we cannot trace its birth. It has come down to us crowned with greenness that can never fade, hallowed with associations too precious to forego, her face beaming with good will, her lips echoing with mirthful laughter and her arms full of gifts. All down

the ages the poor have shouted after her their benediction, and the happy children have crowded around her and clung to her matronly skirts. She is the mother of joy for all men; and I for one am not willing to surrender my share in the inheritance of her smile.

As I have said before, Christmas, like every festival which takes hold of the popular heart, is a nature festival. It rests on the fact that the sun, after starting on his southward journey and sinking lower and lower on the horizon every day, at last stops his downward course, and after a brief interval begins to climb again, and each day climbs higher and higher as he makes his pathway across the heavens. On this fact the life of the earth and the life of man depends. Without it no spring, no summer, no harvest—only cold and death would be in store for man. This is the basis of the joy of this Christmas season. The festive sentiment in varying forms, was so fixed in people's minds that the church had to accept it and seek to give it a Christian coloring. It put the birth of Jesus at this time, though every Christian scholar admits that no one knows when Jesus was born, though the most varied dates were assigned by early Christian authorities, and though one of the early popes frankly admitted that the 25th of December commemorated rather the return of the sun than the birth of Christ. The solid fact is the natural fact, and just as men recognized it before Christianity existed, why should they not recognize it now though they do not believe in Christianity; and recognizing it, why should they not rejoice and be glad?

As a matter of fact, the real Christmas now is not Christian save in name. The real Christmas is not in the formal church services, but in the countless homes of the people—in the homes of thousands who never go to church, wherever the brightly lighted Christmas tree casts its radiance, wherever songs and carols are sung, wherever loving presents are given, or even on the street where men salute one another with a "Merry Christmas." It would not be in me to ask any liberal to adopt any specifically Christian rite—I would not have any one compromise his principles or his loyalties in the slightest degree; but I would have every one not fear to come out on human ground and cherish the sentiments and practices of what I might call natural religion; yes, what I wish to bring out and dwell upon today is the natural and human fact upon which this old mid-winter festival is based, and to show its analogy with other facts of experience—that it is indeed of a piece with life as a whole. The only objection which we could reasonably make to this festival is to the name "Christmas." I should prefer the word "Mid-winter Festival." But even here it must be remembered

that this is only a verbal matter, that custom is very far from keeping the literal significance of words in mind—nobody thinks now that Christmas means a Christ-mass—and hence I have no objection to the name itself, and shall continue to use it.

I.

Now in order to make clear what I have said thus far, I shall go a little more into detail. It was not until sometime in the fifth century that the 25th of December was fixed by the church as the day on which Jesus was born. This may seem strange to you at first, but it is easily explained. The birth of Jesus was celebrated earlier than the fifth century, but on some other day than that which was finally fixed. But why this uncertainty? One would suppose that the loving memory of the disciples would seek out and hold fast to a day such as this. But the explanation is simple and natural. The early church expected the speedy second coming of the Christ in the clouds to put an end to all earthly affairs. It therefore concerned them little to know an earthly date. But he did not come, and by the time they had outlived their disappointment and adjusted themselves to the continuance of the natural order, the memory of this date was entirely lost. The church of the fifth century knew nothing about it. Neither the day nor the month nor the year of the birth of Jesus was known; and there is little hope that they ever will be known. The added knowledge which we have over that of the early church is chiefly negative. As to the year, for example, we know that he was not born in the year one of our era. The traditions recorded in the gospels of Matthew and Luke are hopelessly contradictory; and all that clearheaded criticism can settle is that his birth took place sometime between four and ten years previous to the epoch called "the year of our Lord." As to the month we know only that it could not have been December, at least if we are to accept the traditions of the two gospels which relate the event. December was the height of the rainy season in Palestine, when neither sheep nor shepherds would have been out in the open fields at night. As to the day, not even a guess can be made. How did it happen then that as late as the fifth century the Christian church should decide upon the 25th day of December? The answer to this question will show you how human a day our Christmas is; and also how unreasonable is the protest against its universal character by both orthodox and liberal.

To make this answer clear, we must go back as far as we can and get the earliest traces of it that we can discover. We find it among the ancient Persians. They cele-

brated the first day after the winter solstice as the birthday of their god Mithras. What is the significance of this? As the winter deepens the sun seems to travel farther and farther south. The days grow short, the nights grow long and dark, and the cold intensifies. The dark and the cold seem to be swallowing up the light and the warmth. With our knowledge of nature, and our artificial provisions for light and heat, these things do not disturb us; indeed our chief home pleasures center around these long winter evenings. But to the ancient peoples the night and the cold were veritable demons, which left in their wake gloom and suffering and often death. At this time of the year then, it seemed to them as though their god, the sun, was either going away from them or was dying. But at the extreme southern point of his journey, he paused and stood for a day or so. This was called the solstice or standing still of the sun. Then he started once more on his return and the glad shout went up that he was coming back, bringing light and warmth and life in his beams. This was the re-birth of their God; and they celebrated it with every possible manifestation of joy. I should like to give you a particular description of this Persian festival; but as I have not time for both, it is more important that I should show you how widespread the celebration was.

In ancient Egypt, Isis was the queen of heaven, as Mary came to be later; and Horus was her virgin-born son. His wondrous birth took place toward the end of December. At the date corresponding to our Christmas, the image of Horus was brought out from the temple with sacred ceremony and rejoicing, as now the image of the infant Jesus is brought out and exhibited in Rome. Among the Greeks the 25th of December was celebrated as the birthday of their man-god, Hercules; for he too was the son of a divine father and a human mother; and he also after death ascended visibly into heaven to become deified and worshipped. And still further he was a favorite god with the people, because his life was spent in labors to clear the earth of its evils and make it a happier home for man. In Rome long before the time of Jesus, a festival was celebrated on the date corresponding to our present Christmas, called "Natalis Solis Invicti"—birthday of the invincible sun. About this time also was celebrated the famous Saturnalia. For three days there was universal festivity and gladness. Public schools were closed, courts of law were suspended, offices were shut, slaves were permitted to wear the dress and take on the manners of freemen, and servants sat at the table while their masters waited on them. It was a return for several days of the supposed idyllic peace and

happiness of the reign of their old god, Saturnus, when all men were free and equal, before poverty or sorrow or inequality of rank had invaded the earth.

The ancient inhabitants of northern Europe, long before Christianity was heard of, at the time of the winter solstice, celebrated their Yule-feast. With their great Yule-log upon the hearth and their huge fires roaring up their wide-mouthed chimneys, they celebrated the victory of light and spring over darkness and winter. They brought trees into the houses because they believed that if they brought parts of the forest into their homes the sylvan deities whom they especially loved would follow them and be at home in the midst of their festivities and joys. The central dish of their feast was the bristling and tusked boar's head, representing the rough fierce winter; while in his mouth was an apple, and all about the platter were sprigs of green, indicating how out of winter itself came the undying life of another year. Among the Celtic Druids of Great Britain and Ireland, the day was marked by the lighting of huge fires, called Belfires, on the hill-tops; and these fires were earthly flames in honor of the heavenly god of fire, which was then born anew.

II.

Christmas then looks down upon us with the same eyes that saw the gladness of the childhood world. It is as old as the dim traditions that preceded the birth of history or the oldest memory of man. To this festival, save our modern name and our dogmatic meanings, we have added absolutely nothing. Her Christmas trees, her gifts, her carols, her garlands, her decorated temples, her rejoicing fathers and mothers, her happy children —all these were old when Christianity was born. Not only then is Christmas essentially human, more than it is Christian; but many of its celebrations seem totally out of place in any dogmatic view of the Christian day. If all the race were lost and on this day a supernatural being came into the world to live an outcast life, to suffer, and to die to redeem a part of mankind from an endless hell, it might seem fitting that at least that part which was redeemed should offer up a solemn and sad thanksgiving—solemn as befits such a dreadful deliverance, and sad because only a part are to share it. But what have carols and games and trees and gifts, and garlands and laughter to do with such a day and such a deliverance? Go into any church in Minneapolis today and you will see it appropriately decorated; and yet among all their pine and holly and laurel and poinsettias you will find not a single thing significant of the birth of Jesus, not a single

thing which symbolizes any phase of Christianity; which merely demonstrates that while they claim it as a Christian festival, they celebrate it with the rites and songs and decorations of paganism, that the old natural and human basis of Christmas persists in spite of all the significance which Christianity has tried to read into it.

This indeed has always been the view of certain people in the church. Tertullian, one of the most famous of the church fathers, declared it to be "rank idolatry to deck their doors with garlands or flowers on festive days, according to the custom of the heathen." Another church father, Gregory, protested against it. A church council in France in 614 A. D. forbade Christians to "deck their houses with laurel, ivy, and green boughs." More than once in England attempts have been made to abolish the festival as being a relic of paganism. And if you wish to see how such things were regarded in old New England, read Hawthorne's "Maypole of Merry Mount." It is only in very modern times that Christmas has had a place in the New England churches. When the Puritans came to this country they hoped that they had left this behind them as a pagan corruption. And so instead of Christmas originating with Christianity, its spirit and its genius are foreign to it. It is not a Christian holiday at all, it is a Human holiday. Supernatural dogmatism has never taken kindly to it. It has always been most regarded where natural human sympathies have had freest scope. Its universal celebration today indicates and is due to the decay of dogmatic Christianity, and the flourishing development of the humanities.

We come back now for a moment to our old question —Why did the church select this day, already universally celebrated, as the birthday of Jesus? The answer is— Just because it was already universally celebrated. Listen to St. Chrysostem: "On this day the birth of Christ was lately fixed in Rome, in order that while the heathen were busy with their profane ceremonies, the Christians might perform their holy rites undisturbed." The simple fact is this—The church found this day a universal festival, fast fixed in the hearts of the people. They could not uproot it, so they took the more practical course of adopting and rechristening it. They took it whole—with all its features and ceremonies unimpaired, only they read new meanings into the old customs, and sought Christian symbols in the pagan rites.

I speak as I do, not that I love Jesus less, not that I would exclude the mention of his name or due honor to him, but that I love what is older and greater and grander than Jesus more. To me Christmas marks not merely the birth of a peasant teacher in Palestine 1900 years ago;

but the gifts and joy and hope of all the ages. It is the day of the birth of light and warmth. Its garlands and evergreens are the new life of Spring, the life that only dies to be perpetually reborn, extemporized in the darkest hour of winter. It is human hope always forestalling reality, always believing in the coming of the better days. Christianity is only a passing phase of the world's thought; its framework is only temporary; it is put up and it will be taken down; but the building of human hope will still rise in ever grander proportions. Christianity is only a passing fashion in which humanity clothes itself. The dress will wear out, and the eternal worker will weave a new one; but man will grow in stature and beauty. Systems come and go, religions rise and fall, nations grow and decay; but the human hope and faith and joy which are the life of the Christmas time—these "spring eternal in the human breast."

III.

And now having said this much in regard to the origin of Christmas, having shown that this festival is universal and human rather than sectarian and theological, let us turn to its real significance. The particular charm about this festival is that it takes place when nature's face is cold and cheerless. The leaves have fallen from the trees, the earth looks brown and bare, or perhaps is covered with snow and ice, the ground is no longer soft beneath our feet, and the air is no longer mild; but instead a sort of rigidity and harshness and inhospitableness settles down upon the outer world. It is as if nature were aging, as if she had exhausted herself, as if she were shrinking and fading. This of itself breeds seriousness, if not melancholy thoughts. Somehow the end of all things is brought before our minds. It is not a time of rejoicing, but rather of mourning.

And yet in the face of all this there occurs the brightest joyfulest festival of the year. We see and feel the wintry chill, and yet something takes place which makes us disregard it, which causes our spirit to triumph over it. The sun which has been sinking, sinking, sinking to the southward, and so stripping the earth of warmth and life and beauty, sinks no more. The winter indeed continues, outwardly nature is the same, yet looking forward we know that the power of the cold is broken, that in due time it will turn to spring and finally to summer. Our joy then has this peculiar quality, that it is in the midst of a time that on its surface should make us sad, that it is mixed with hope and faith, that it is a kind of triumph over what is immediately around us.

Very different is the spontaneous joy of a fair summer day, when we simply yield to the influences about us, and

drink in the sweet sounds and scents that nature herself provides on every hand. That is the joy of the senses. This is the joy of the spirit. It is like that of a captive who makes light of his prison walls, not because they are not there, but because he knows that in time he is to be freed from them. We do not see, and yet we believe. Life and warmth are far away, yet we know that they are bound to come. As if to emphasize the contrast, this mid-winter festival is always in the dark. It would mean little in the daytime—it is against the background of the dark with its gloom and chill, that the lights which symbolize our joy stand out with their warm radiance. No matter how cold without, or how the winds blow, the festive joy is all the same. It is the contrast with all that is unpleasant without, the brightness in the midst of the darkness, that makes the charm, the glory of this chief festival of the year.

IV.

Let us linger a little over the primitive, natural significance of the day—and then later consider its spiritual suggestions.

It is possible that some of us with the artificial training we have had in the past object to the simply natural origin which is thus given to the Christmas festival; and still more to the simply physical origin that is thus assigned to all the light and warmth and beauty of the world. At least it may seem like taking away from some of you a beautiful illusion to say that man and all living creatures are dependent upon the sun, when you had thought that they were created and sustained by an unseen hand. It seems very like materialism, you will say. And yet when we face the real fact, whatever power may be back of the phenomena of the universe, the sun is that by which we live. But for that great burning globe which hangs in the heavens, the earth would be a wintry waste and life impossible. To the early fathers of the race, the sun was a living being—a god—and in view of the life he begets in us and awakes anew and afresh each year in the world, this seems far nearer the truth than the view that is commonly taken. Why fear then to recognize our dependence upon the sun; why hesitate to look up and bless him; why fail to praise him? Our life and all earthly life depends upon him. Not only that, but our health depends upon him. If he dies, we die; if he lives, we live. So in a sense the sun is still god. Before all the other gods were born, he lived and was already old. As long as he shines, the trees will blossom, the grass will grow, the birds will sing, and men will rejoice.

So in a very real sense we are all children of the sun, children of the light. Not only did our earth spring from him, but all the force and energy and life that we know of is simply stored and transformed solar energy. So the source of our being is not in hiding, as we have been taught. He greets us every day, enthroned in glory resplendent. Out there he shines, radiant and immaculate. Of course the sun asks for no prayers, and accepts no gifts, and shows no favors. We bring no flowers to his altars, we light no candles in his honor, we sing no anthems to lull his ears. He is self-sufficient, and asks for neither offerings nor bribes nor flattery. You need not pray to him to do his work—he is not an absent-minded god. Every morning he rises in all his splendor, bringing warmth and light and life to the world. Therefore we need not worship him; but we can have no higher ambition than to be like him, giving light, dispelling darkness, turning night into day, and causing the barren earth to produce bread and beauty. And I can think of no finer heaven than a world wondrous fair and peopled all with the children of the light.

This is not banishing divinity from the world—rather it is giving divinity to the world, instead of viewing it as a sole occupant of impossible empty space beyond. The real god is the world viewed as alive, instinct with order and law. This god is in the sun, or rather it is the sun —and it is this divine sun, this living sun, this age-in and age-out benefactor of man and friend to all the earth, that we remember with honor, following in the steps of a long and unbroken line of fathers and forefathers of the race, in this mid-winter festival. It is the same sun the ancient Romans did obeisance to, the same that the Teutons and the Celts honored in their Yule-tide before they ever heard of Christ; it is the constant sun, the sun whom the clouds may hide but not destroy, who does not change though the earth may change, and whose ever-enduring power is symbolized to us in the one kind of tree on earth which keeps ever green, and which on this day we bring into our homes and make the shrine of our worship and our joy.

Such are reflections that come to me in considering the mid-winter festival, and that mingle with and heighten my joy. The lights and the greetings and the presents are cheerful, but something like this is the old time historical basis of the joy; and this wider outlook, this deeper insight, gives it a mightier meaning to me. It is sometimes said that this is a children's festival. I do not so regard it. It is and always has been a religious festival—one which has its happy and beautiful side for children and which I wish every child might have a taste of, and yet

which should give joy and an uplift of the spirit to every adult who can stop to think about life and the conditions of life at all. To become conscious of those mighty powers through whose beneficence we live is indeed a privilege. And in these shortest days of the year, these days when if we judged by the senses alone we might think these powers to be fading or under eclipse, it is a specially happy privilege to realize that they are still strong and supreme, and to utter forth songs of thanksgiving and of praise.

V.

Yet this mid-winter festival, if intelligently appreciated, is not without its spiritual suggestions. It means at bottom, to take it broadly and spiritually, that in the darkest hour there is hope of coming light, that in the straits of life there is always a resource. This in a spiritual sense is what our human Christmas means. Return again to its origin. It was the birthday of the sun. That meant the death of the darkness and the cold, and the far off coming of the gladsome spring, with its birds and flowers and rippling waters. Do you not see the parable? It is the parable of human hope, as the poets have sung it throughout the ages. It is the parable which tells us that just as this midwinter darkness and cold will eventually give way to light and warmth, just so in the moral world as in the natural, no matter how deep our sorrow, how tangled our perplexity, how dark our prospect, there is always a way out. These will in time give way to joy and happiness.

Recall that beautiful old myth in the Hebrew scriptures of the Garden of Eden. Paradise was lost, man was cast out of Eden, henceforth to earn his bread by the sweat of his brow; but does the story end in despair? No, it closes with the promise of a messiah, the prophecy of a good time coming. When the peaceful and happy reign of Saturnus had passed away in Rome, when discord and war and murder had driven peace and mercy back to their native heaven, did they lose hope? No, they immediately began to forecast the recrowning of their beloved god as the king of the earth, when again perfect happiness should prevail. When Jesus hung suspended between heaven and earth, cold and lifeless, and the disciples who had expected much of him scattered, did they despair? No, they immediately began to look forward to his second coming when he would establish his kingdom of perfect peace and love. And the Jews and the Romans and the Christians are not the only people who have cherished the Messianic hope. Under that or some other name it has been one of the mightiest factors in the history of the

world. There has never been any time in the past when in all nations there was not this forward looking, this belief in the good time coming. Even among the Indians on this continent, as Longfellow has sung the old Indian tradition in his beautiful poem, the people watch Hiawatha sailing away down the sunlit stream, and then turn to their tasks and their toils again, cherishing in their hearts the belief that by and by he will return and bring victory over all their enemies and deliverance from all their evils.

It seems to me something superb and something strange in its wonder, that humanity will cherish this immortal hope in the face of death and sickness and pain and poverty and despair. Evil seems to be triumphant on every hand. For generations we have talked about turning spears into pruning hooks and shields into plows, and yet during the past decade the whole world has given its time to turning pruning hooks into spears and plows into shields; and yet even now as we emerge from the most horrible war the world has ever seen our hope for peace is greater than ever. We talk about the reign of justice, and injustice seems to triumph. We talk about the growth of intelligence, and yet see the masses of people running wild after every folly. We talk about good conquering evil, and yet all about us there is so much of evil and its consequences. Is it not a wonder that men have faith and hope at all? And yet that eternal hope continues to live, and in spite of everything man will believe.

And Christmas is simply the burst of this belief into song—the triumph of right, the triumph of love, the fresh incoming of the divine air into the world. It is the festival, in its spiritual sense, of that faith which in the present ill descries the far-off features of the coming good. Through the snowstorms it sees June. Above the howling blasts of December, it hears bird-songs. Beneath the snow it recognizes the thrill of seeds that promise harvest. Across the storm-cloud of war, it beholds the bow of peace. Surrounded by squalid poverty, it glimpses the dim outlines of a time when man shall hunger no more. It hears the wail of sorrow and crime swell and change to a paean of triumph and an anthem of joy. Thus it is that Christmas, shutting her eyes to the present and opening them to the good time coming, sings her glad carols, decks herself with garlands, trims her doorways with greens, and makes real to our hearts and our hopes the coming era of light and love.

The essential spirit then of the world-wide human Christmas is this joyous faith of man—ever growing through the ages, and thus hastening to complete realization—that light and truth and justice are constantly being

reborn into higher and higher forms and will some day reign supreme. No singer of all the ages has so hopefully caught the tune of this human Christmas as has Tennyson. The song is familiar to you, but hear it once more, and note how in complete accord with what I have been saying, it rings the knell of old evil, and the advent of the ever-conquering good:

"Ring out the old, ring in the new,
Ring, happy bells, across the snow;
The year is going, let him go;
Ring out the false, ring in the true.

Ring out the grief that saps the mind,
For those that here we see no more;
Ring out the feud of rich and poor,
Ring in redress for all mankind.

Ring out a slowly dying cause,
And ancient forms of party strife;
Ring in the nobler modes of live,
With sweeter manners, purer laws.

Ring out the want, the care, the sin,
The faithless coldness of the times;
Ring out, ring out my mournful rhymes,
But ring the fuller minstrel in.

Ring out false pride in place and blood,
The civic slander and the spite;
Ring in the love of truth and right,
Ring in the common love of good.

Ring out old shapes of foul disease;
Ring out the narrowing lust of gold;
Ring out the thousand wars of old,
Ring in the thousand years of peace."

Believe me, men and women, all this is no baseless dream. The Christmas prophecy is rooted in the nature of things, and it shall blossom out into complete fulfillment. The past sent its agonizing prayer up to heaven, and the better present state of the world is a partial answer. The future calls to us across the ages and says: Man's hope is not in vain, his dream of a better world shall one day come down out of the clouds and build itself in rock foundations and solid walls here on earth. May we, like the coral polyp, leave behind us some result that shall enter into the construction of this larger humanity of the future!

It is the custom to publish Mr. Dietrich's addresses in a series of eight numbers during the church year, one address each month being selected for that purpose. The titles listed below are still available and may be obtained by application to The Publication Committee, 803 La Salle Ave., Minneapolis, at the price of 10 cents per copy.

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